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# The People's Freeway: Reclaiming a Concrete Corridor to Make Way for the Next--and Better--Los Angeles

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MARCUS RENNER

# The People's Freeway

*Reclaiming a concrete corridor to make way for the next—and better—Los Angeles*

HAT IF WE CUT THE FENCE?," Nicole Possert yelled above the roaring traffic. On the other side of a battered chain-link fence clogged with trash, drivers zoomed toward Los Angeles. Nicole and I were pondering a project that would shock most Los Angelenos: shutting down a freeway so that people could walk and ride bikes on a road they normally experience at sixty miles per hour.

The Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway, known to commuters as the Pasadena or 110 Freeway, is the oldest freeway in the western United States. Completed in 1940, it carries 120,000 cars a day through the broad canyon of the Arroyo Seco, which runs southwest from the mountains above Pasadena toward downtown Los Angeles. For much of its length, the parkway's six narrow lanes wind along the concrete channel that holds what's left of the Arroyo's stream. Together, the road and stream pass through a dense urban landscape of pocket parks and arching bridges, leaning sycamores and historic homes.

Shutting down a freeway in Los Angeles—even for a few hours—might seem comparable to driving a lance through a windmill. The effort to close the parkway, however, was part of a broader vision for the Arroyo—a dream that, if realized, could provide a model for creating livable communities across southern California. Such places would offer clean and convenient transportation, accessible parks and open space, and would cultivate an appreciation of both local history and wild nature. In short, what had drawn us to the side of the highway on this

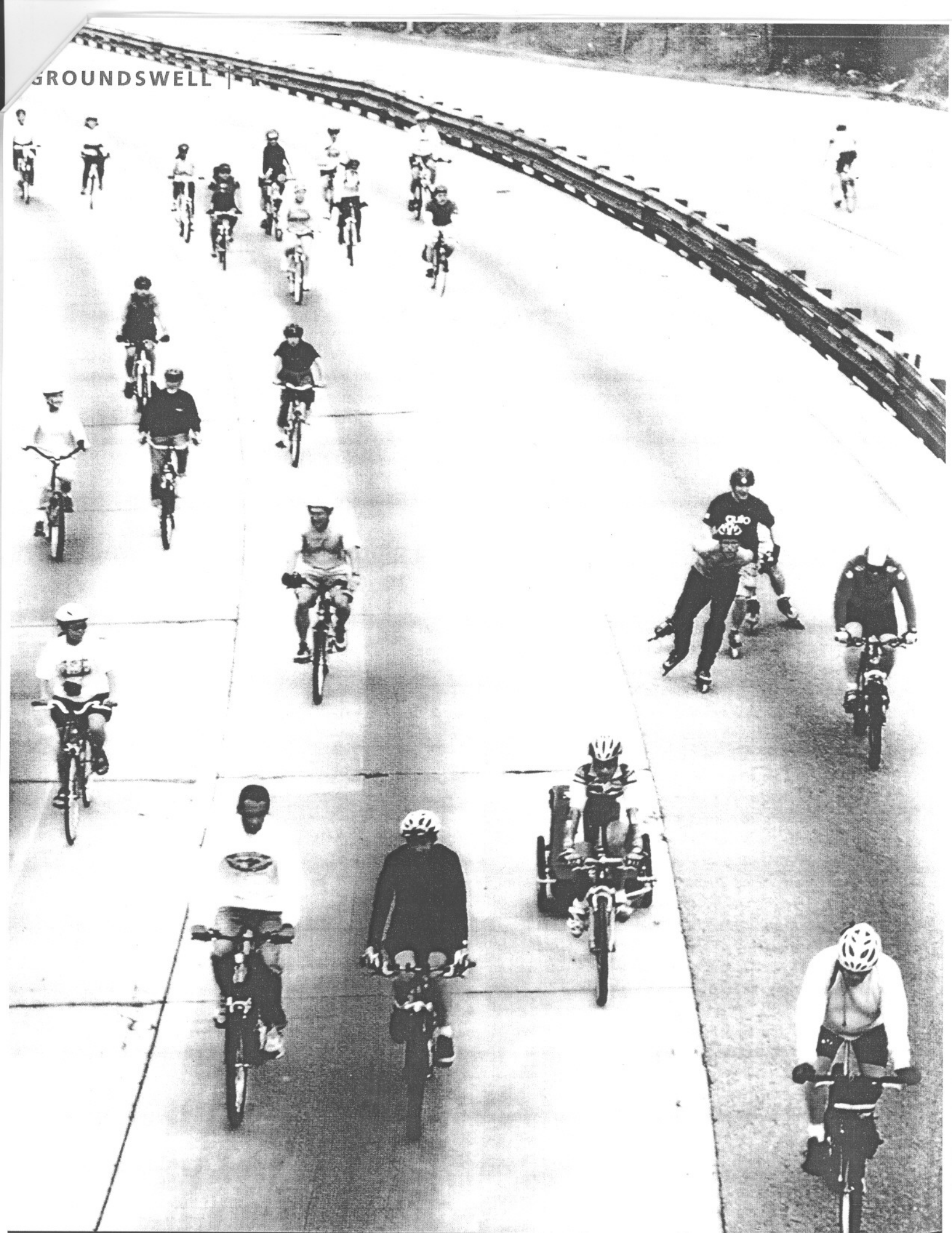
December morning was a plan for the next Los Angeles.

The closure had a certain magical appeal. In southern California, freeways contribute to sprawl and air pollution and often carve up communities, reinforcing and sometimes creating social and economic divisions. Their effects are made more acute by the fact that Los Angeles has fewer acres of open space per capita than any other large metropolitan area in the country. Perhaps more important, freeways affect how people think about and experience the local landscape, reducing public understanding of place and geography to origins and destinations, with nothing in between. "Freeways," said Bob Gottlieb, head of L.A.'s Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, "are the city's biggest environmental issue."

The ad hoc group to which Nicole and I belonged was formed to create a different sort of city. We viewed the act of shutting down L.A.'s first freeway as a symbolic gesture to stimulate discussion about how to create livable urban communities.

THE ROUND COBBLES of the Arroyo Seco, or "dry creek," are incorporated into garden walls, along sidewalks, in park benches and drinking fountains, lending the Arroyo environs a different texture than the rest of the city. In the late 1800s, this rough and wild landscape attracted Charles Fletcher Lummis, a journalist, historian, and archeologist of the American Southwest. Lummis, the first city editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, built his own home from stones he hauled from the river. Here, Lummis hosted the artistic

GROUNDSWELL



and well-to-do, who celebrated the blend of city and nature they found in the Arroyo Seco canyon. Writing for magazines such as *Land of Sunshine*, Lummis and his friends crafted an image of southern California as a place of renewal and promise with a romantic (yet fictitious) past, built around the Spanish missions and the padres' supposedly benevolent treatment of the native Tongva people. Packaged by chambers of commerce and railroads, echoed today in everything from the area's faux Italian gardens to Taco Bell restaurants, this image drew thousands of immigrants to the region.

By the early 1900s the Arroyo was a center of the Arts and Crafts movement. Rows of Craftsman bungalows arose in the canyon. The idea that the city should blend into the landscape, promoted by local architects, became an important part of the Arroyo's identity. Today, streets still bend and jog around the hills and scrub clings to the steeper slopes. Lummis's home now overlooks the freeway at Avenue 43, but his Southwest Museum—which he built to house his collection of Native American artifacts—still raises its distinctive adobe tower above the Arroyo.

## Conversion of open space into parkland could displace numerous people who are homeless. One question we faced was, "Livable for whom?"

In the process of learning how to care for her 1905 Craftsman home, Nicole Possert became interested in this history. She began to appreciate the central role her neighborhood had played in southern California's development. "It was just amazing to me that no one seemed to be aware of this area's rich history or why it was important," she said. By 1994, she was president of the Highland Park Heritage Trust, a local preservation group, and in 1996 she joined a state task force to address longstanding parkway issues of trash, graffiti, noise, and accidents. "My concern was, and still is, if this is the gateway to our communities and it looks bad, how are people going to see these historic resources?"

The original vision for the parkway—described to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Harland Bartholomew in 1930—was of a leisurely, scenic drive between Pasadena and downtown Los Angeles. A disorganized mix of electric trolleys, buses, and automobiles already clogged city streets; the parkway was the first in a series of modern expressways Olmsted, Bartholomew, and others proposed as part of an integrated transportation system that incorporated trains, buses, and bicycles. Following the architects' lead, engineers who designed the parkway sought to balance efficiency and aesthetics. They eschewed walls to give drivers a better view of the surrounding hills, and built arching bridges over road and stream. Broad curves followed the con-

tours of the canyon and slowed traffic. Tawny gold sycamores leaned over the road. Wooden guardrails and garden plantings helped the parkway blend into the landscape.

By the 1950s, efficiency had become the primary goal of freeway architecture, and in time faster cars overwhelmed the parkway's design. Today, the road carries almost four times its rated capacity and has a much higher accident rate than other local freeways.

But in June 2002, the efforts of neighborhood activists and state officials like Possert earned the road a National Scenic Byway designation, making the parkway eligible for grants to improve safety and beautify surrounding communities. Millions of government dollars became available to revive the experience that the parkway's designers had envisioned.

Restoring the parkway to its leisurely splendor is one element of a renewed attempt to create an integrated transportation system, both for the Arroyo and the region as a whole. In 2003, the new Gold Line commuter train began running between Pasadena and Los Angeles. Proposed bus, bike, and pedestrian routes, if linked to rail stations, would allow people to travel rel-

atively easily without a car and make the Arroyo a transportation model for the rest of Los Angeles.

The stream, too, has drawn attention from those who want to remake the city. The headwaters of the Arroyo Seco fall down a shaded staircase of pools and cascades in the San Gabriel Mountains. Downstream, the Arroyo Seco is confined to a concrete flood-control channel. So disguised, the creek flows for almost eleven miles past soccer fields, golf courses, the Rose Bowl football stadium, and pockets of seminatural, open land. It joins the parkway for the last six miles of its journey before emptying onto the broad concrete flood channel of the moribund Los Angeles River.

At the confluence of these two urban waterways is the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens, home to several environmental groups and government agencies. Every day Anne Dove, a planner with the National Park Service, drives the parkway or rides the Gold Line to work here. "There is something about the Arroyo that just resonates with people," she said. "It's something about the scale of the place, that you can see all the boundaries, all the edges within one viewshed."

For three years Anne has helped the Arroyo Seco Foundation and North East Trees with a plan to restore a living stream to the canyon. In 2002, their work piqued the interest of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which may remove portions of the Arroyo's concrete channel—a first for Los Angeles County. This



development meshes with plans to enhance and expand existing parks and open space throughout the watershed.

Most of the land along the Arroyo's floodplain, which varies in width from fifty yards to a quarter mile, is publicly owned. By combining this land with the right-of-way that the state owns along the parkway, local environmental groups envision an eleven-mile greenway stretching from the mountains to downtown. Bit by bit, that greenway is appearing; South Pasadena is beginning construction on a four-acre nature park, and in Los Angeles, the National Audubon Society recently opened a new urban nature center overlooking the Arroyo.

The nature center lies across the Arroyo from the chain-link fence where Nicole Possert and I stood on that damp December morning in 2001. I had become involved in the effort through my employer, the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (part of Occidental College). My colleagues and I were interested in how different Arroyo initiatives could combine to achieve the broader goal of creating more livable communities. "Working on the Arroyo gave us the opportunity to address several issues at the same time," said institute Director Bob Gottlieb. "That's really important to build the kind of diverse coalitions that you need to create an effective community movement."

We began hosting an Arroyo discussion group in 2000 for researchers, activists, and government officials to share information. When, in the spring of 2001, someone proposed a walk and bicycle ride on the parkway, everyone in the room saw an opportunity both to heighten the profile of the Arroyo and build public support for the watershed's various community projects. Soon this idea had a name—ArroyoFest—and a date: October 6, 2002. Since I was the institute's new education and outreach coordinator, my phone soon became the center of a whirlwind of activity.

A WEEK AFTER OUR SCOUTING EXPEDITION, Nicole and I described our idea for cutting the fence to twenty people in the parlor of a Craftsman mansion at the canyon's edge. Our job had been to find the best way to get walkers and cyclists off the closed freeway and into Sycamore Grove Park, a fifteen-acre grassy parcel where we planned an all-day festival. The park is between two freeway exits. Cutting the fence was the only answer.

A hundred years ago, boosters extolled the Arroyo as a playground for the white upper class. The communities that share the Arroyo today—and that were represented in that meeting—present a very different face. Forty-two percent of the seven hundred thousand people sharing the Arroyo were born outside the United States. Average household incomes range from less than ten thousand dollars to more than sixty thousand dollars a year, and the varied topography has balkanized the Arroyo into a place where graffitied parks exist in the shadows of gated mansions.

During ArroyoFest's planning, people's disparate geographies began to merge; their sense of place broadened. But the task of bringing such diverse communities together to care for the shared resources of the twenty-two-mile-long Arroyo is, really, a social experiment. We began to develop an appreciation for how creating "livable communities" means more than just making the Arroyo a pretty place. Social and economic issues such as jobs, gangs, and public safety entered the conversation. For example, conversion of undeveloped open space along the Arroyo into parkland means the likely eviction of numerous people who are homeless. One important question we faced was, "Livable for whom?"

The arrival of the Gold Line train service has also sent real estate prices skyrocketing, threatening to push out low-income families and businesses. "If you talk to communities that have gone through gentrification, most will tell you that they didn't see



it coming until it was too late," said Beth Steckler, who lives in Highland Park and works for Livable Places. Beth's nonprofit group is trying to get ahead of the gentrification curve in the Arroyo by converting two abandoned factories next to a light-rail stop into affordable housing. The project can't be done soon enough; the median price of a single-family home in Highland Park rose almost 70 percent in three years, topping \$250,000. In many ways, success in remaking the Arroyo will depend as much on Beth's project as on restoring the stream.

It will also depend on education. Carmela Gomes has taught public school in the Arroyo for more than twenty years and sits on the Historic Highland Park Neighborhood Council. She's helped develop a weekend workshop called "A River Runs Through It" to integrate the study of the Arroyo into classrooms. "It's something that we have to pass on to our young people, this sense that this place belongs to them, this sense of home and what it means to take care of that," Carmela explained.

ArroyoFest's early meetings connected these efforts and planted seeds for a more comprehensive vision for the Arroyo's

future. But the first question that everyone raised was the big one: Would the Californian Department of Transportation—Caltrans—agree to close the road? Caltrans engineers worried the closure would back up L.A.'s entire freeway system. But a detour plan and helpful letters from elected officials convinced Caltrans to let our group of starry-eyed activists have the freeway from six to ten on a Sunday morning. We turned our attention to money.

To encourage participation, we decided to allow walkers for free and to charge cyclists ten dollars. Still, we needed \$250,000, and grant money was slow in coming. By March 2002, the checking account was empty and we were debating changing Arroyo-



Fest's date to buy fundraising time. Then in June, the first of our grants came through. ArroyoFest was moving ahead.

We hired a consultant to obtain the final permits, handle logistics, and coordinate volunteers. On July 17, we had pulled together our key supporters to assign tasks when the consultant surprised everyone by saying that he didn't think we had time to prepare. He refused to do more work. Frustrated, some people stormed out; others were relieved; still others proposed a new date in the spring or summer. Everyone departed uncertain about ArroyoFest's future. After ten months of meetings, outreach, and fundraising, at the end of the night all that remained was an empty room.

THE INSTITUTE REMAINED ArroyoFest's main backer, so a week later I picked up the phone to ask who wanted to stick with it, and found there was enough interest to keep going. Planning for ArroyoFest had been very informal, but our need for more structure was now obvious. Anne Dove agreed to help our diverse group devise ground rules and a decision-making process. "It was excruciating," she said. But she got it done. We soon had a regular meeting time, notebooks describing our accomplishments, and a new date: June 15, 2003. Additional grants came through, and we

hired the organizers of the Los Angeles Marathon and Bike Tour to run the show. Things started to come together.

With Carmela Gomes's help, the institute organized workshops on the Arroyo at the Southwest Museum for more than fifty school teachers, whom we encouraged to make festival exhibits and banners. Bob Gottlieb arranged a partnership with Sweat-X, a worker-owned cooperative, to sew t-shirts for the event. Artists helped with graphic design; unions donated paper and labor for printing. Claudine Chen from the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition created a website. Most important, we obtained event insurance and began to receive donations from companies and public agencies that detected new energy and momentum.

In April, with two months to go, the printer delivered posters and entry forms, and we called for volunteers to distribute them. Ten people filled the small conference room for instructions. These became fifteen, then twenty, then thirty. People stood in the hallway to listen. Three hours later we shooed the last of them out the door with armloads of materials. Our plan to close the highway was in the fast lane.

The final weeks were a blur of phone calls, media interviews, contracts, and deadlines. Last-minute requests for booth space poured in. A final program draft went off to the printer, and a crew spruced up Sycamore Grove Park. Traffic advisories hit the airwaves, and driving, biking, and bus directions from every corner of the Southland went up on the web. A contractor cut the fence and groomed the entrance where Nicole and I had stood eighteen months before. On June 14, an article about the next day's ArroyoFest appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. The office phone started ringing at six in the morning and didn't stop until midnight.

On the morning of June 15, Claudine Chen got up at five-thirty to bicycle to the intersection that marks the beginning of the freeway in Pasadena. "There was a lot of fog, and it was really quiet and dark," she recalled. "The first person didn't show up until six-fifteen. Then I turned around and suddenly there was this whole mob of people. They just kept coming and coming. It was pretty unreal."

At seven a horn sounded, and ArroyoFest was on. More than two thousand cyclists let out cheers as they rolled past the blue and yellow ArroyoFest banner, down the parkway, and into the mist. Ten-speeds, tandems, and tricycles hit the road as a chorus of birds and clicking bike gears supplanted roaring engines. "I always knew that parks lined the parkway, but seeing and experiencing them as I went by was magical," said one rider.

Down at Sycamore Grove Park, Anne Dove arrived a little before six and began checking in the sixty community groups that had taken booth space. Carmela Gomes was busy setting up school exhibits beneath the coast live oak trees and helping di-

rect volunteers as they covered tables with bottled water and programs. The first cyclist rolled in at seven-thirty, and by eight the park's band shell, which once hosted John Phillip Sousa's brass band concerts, was alive with acoustic folk and Latin soul.

By eight-thirty the veil of mist had lifted for the thousands of enthusiastic walkers gathered at the parkway's ten ramps along the route. The greens and golden browns of the Arroyo seemed more vivid than usual against the bright blue sky. One volunteer brought her two teenage daughters, both of whom were less than thrilled to be awake so early. By the time the walk started, the spectacle of the event had overcome their cool reserve. One of them ran to the side of the road. "That's a passion flower!" she gasped, pointing to a delicate blossom growing on the shoulder. "I read about them in school, but I've never thought I'd actually see one."

At the other end of the canyon, in Lincoln Heights, a mostly Latino crowd assembled in a postage stamp-sized park. At nine, the Nightingale Middle School band played the national anthem while three hundred children and teenagers from the Anahauk

way and all that joyous, constructive human energy in action. Without the cars along the parkway you could almost hear the trees breathe a little easier."

ArroyoFest unlocked people's imagination and demonstrated to the more than five thousand participants who took to the freeway what is possible. Nicole Possert walked down from Avenue 64. "I saw some people who had their Walkman on and were looking straight ahead, but I overheard most people saying 'Look at those trees,' or 'I never noticed that bridge before,' or 'Isn't that interesting,'" she said. "It allowed people to gain an appreciation for what a special area it is." Another participant wrote on a local listserve, "Can we open the Parkway every Sunday morning? In San Francisco and New York, they do the same with their parks (Golden Gate and Central Park). Why not here?"

By ten, Afro-Haitian dancers were performing in the band shell while a second stage hosted storytellers and a Filipino gospel choir. "The looks on people's faces when they came off that piece of pavement—just the biggest smiles," said Carmela

## Instead of being a means to get someplace else, the parkway became the place to be, a tree-lined plaza where residents gathered for a stroll.

Soccer League, wearing their red and yellow jerseys, began walking a mile and a half north to Sycamore Grove Park. At Avenue 57, a giant puppet labeled "Spirit of the Arroyo" joined the procession; at Avenue 64, a lone bagpiper wearing a kilt serenaded participants. People posed for photos next to highway signs, turned cartwheels, and admired more than ninety banners made by local students and hung on fences along the road.


Freed from their cars, participants put aside their drivers' defensiveness. One schoolteacher walked four miles from Pasadena with his wife and young children. "For my daughter, it was just a big party," he told me. "It was great. You were able to see things from interesting angles that you normally miss because you're going so fast." Several people said they noticed the shape of the hills and canyon for the first time. The quiet that settled over the road drew people out of their houses. One of my former high school teachers wrote to me, "Once we reached Highland Park and you could see homes and people; it was so cool. They were taking videos and pictures, and waving and smiling."

Instead of being a means to get someplace else, the parkway became the place to be, a tree-lined plaza where residents gathered for a Sunday stroll. Neighbors sat on guardrails and chatted; people walked their dogs. Skateboarders and in-line skaters glided down the road and children raced between the lane lines. "Walking the area was incredible," wrote another participant. "It was an amazing sight to see all the bicyclists on the Arroyo park-

Gomes. Children planted seedlings and had their faces painted in the park, people signed up to join community groups, and speakers like Beth Steckler talked about their projects. Several people wore fish hats, emblems for the native steelhead trout that might one day swim up a restored Arroyo stream.

The next day, newspapers around the country carried the headline "Thousands Snub Car Culture." From Japan to France, the press was taken with the idea of closing a Los Angeles freeway.

In the months since, Nicole and the rest of the Scenic Byway team submitted a management plan for the parkway to Caltrans. Beth Steckler's Livable Places is close to building its affordable housing. Claudine Chen organized a scouting expedition for a commuter bikeway between Pasadena and Los Angeles, and Carmela Gomes's neighborhood council is trying to create parks out of two vacant lots. The future of these and other projects in the Arroyo depends on funding, political will, and the ability to maintain and strengthen the networks created by the event, but a sense now exists that these initiatives are part of a larger, coordinated movement.

"I think it showed the community what they can do," Anne Dove said. "If people from the community can work with Caltrans to close down the freeway, just think about what else they can accomplish." 

For more information, visit [www.arroyofest.org](http://www.arroyofest.org).